MADERA Tribune

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North Fork Mono Indians (Part 1) Mobile, Adaptable and Integrated

By Cal Tatum
Tribune Writer/Photographer

The North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians has proposed a large casino north of the City of Madera on state Route 99. The tribe has worked with the county to develop a comprehensive memorandum of understanding to mitigate any impact the casino may cause. Tribal officials feel they have identified an environmentally and economically viable location within their historic lands.

Tribal ancestors at work picking grapes near Minturn, just north of the City of Madera, circa 1900.

From the Collection of tribal citizen, Leona Chepo

Photo by: Special to the Madera Tribune

To prove the tribe's history in Madera, the Tribal Council of the North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians has been working for nearly two years to put together the ethnohistory of the tribe.

This has not been an easy task. Records have been lost, details are complex and span from aboriginal times to today. There were no clear-cut boundaries for tribes and the Western Mono people crossed over lands used by the Yokut and other tribal affiliations.

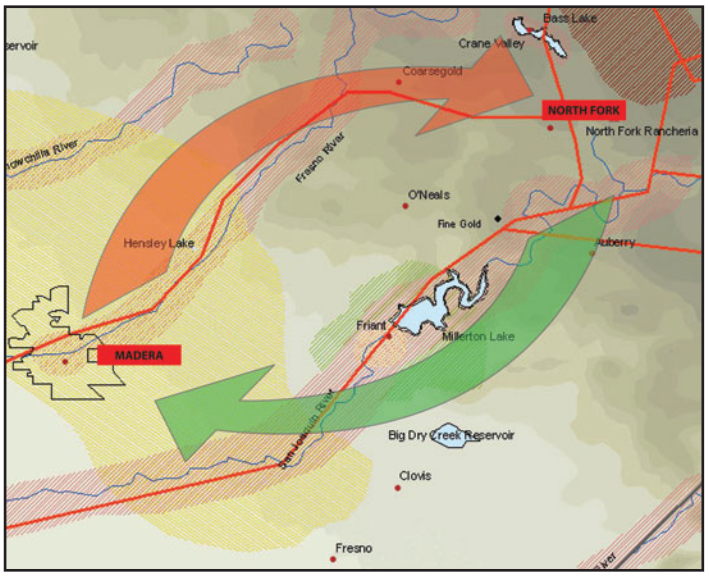
When the Spanish arrived in California, kidnapping and fatal diseases decimated many tribes. Making definite statements of "aboriginal territory" is difficult. Modern concepts of land ownership did not apply to California's natives so the term "use and occupancy" is more accurately reflected by their relationship to the land and each other.

We will present a summary of the findings of the North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians in a five-part series. These are excerpts from those findings.

Establishing Madera link

The link between the North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians and Madera County has a long history.

When the first explorers and traders arrived in the early 1800s, they found Native groups that interacted with one another, traded, hunted, enjoyed sharing ceremonies and even intermarried. The tribal historical study shows that even similarities in language could make it difficult to discern differences in the local tribes.



This map shows how the how the tribe migrated from the foothills down to the Valley for hunting and fishing and worked with other tribes along the way.

Photo by: Special to the Madera Tribune

Most of the relationships between tribal ancestors and settlers in Madera County were typically friendly. The Tribe appears to have tried to adapt to change. That interaction continued when the tribe lived on a reservation operated by the federal government near the present-day city of Madera during the 1850s. When the government broke up the reservation, tribal ancestors continued to work with settlers on their ranches and farms throughout the Madera area and up into the foothills.

Determining boundaries

Determining tribal boundaries is difficult, according to the report, use and occupancy of land only reflects the relationship indigenous peoples had with the land. California's natives did not look at land ownership in the same manner that we do today.

Despite their ability to adapt to a wide range of situations, the indigenous peoples of California lost nearly 75 percent of their population after California was discovered by the Spaniards. Warfare, massacre, forced conversion, starvation and exposure took a tremendous toll, but the epidemics of the 1830s were most devastating.

(Part 1 Continued over)

North Fork Mono Indians (Part 1) Mobile, Adaptable and Integrated

(Cont. from front page)

American and French Canadian trappers ventured into the Valley to hunt and trap along the rivers. One man, Ewing Young, explored the Valley from Sacramento to the Tejon Pass. He first visited the area in 1832 but on his return in 1833, what he saw was complete devastation of the Indian population.

Ewing wrote:

"On our return, late in the summer of 1833, we found the Valley depopulated. From the head of the Sacramento, to the great bend and slough of the San Joaquin (near Madera), we did not see more than six or eight live Indians, while large numbers of their skulls and dead bodies were to be seen under almost every shade tree, near water, where the uninhabited and deserted villages had been converted into graveyards; and on the San Joaquin River, in the immediate neighborhood of a larger class of villages, we found not only many graves, but the vestiges of a funeral pyre."

Some Indians who had been kidnapped to use as a labor force on coastal missions, escaped only to learn their communities had been wiped out by disease. Many of these went into the mountains and took up residence with groups other than their own.

Tribes throughout the area worked, hunted, and celebrated together, and even intermarried.

All of these events make it difficult to establish boundaries, but they also show connection to lands throughout Madera County for the North Fork Mono and all tribes in the area.

Mono Ancestors Traveled

Nutrition was a driving force of the North Fork Mono, according to findings in the historical study.

The weather conditions of the San Joaquin Valley were different from what we find today. The Valley was prone to severe heat, drought and flooding in the winters. It was not very welcoming to full-time inhabitants. But, the Valley was an important food source. The Valley was home to large game such as elk and antelope. Fishing was excellent in the Valley, especially when salmon were running.

The weather conditions were more hospitable in the foothills, making it a better location for permanent residence. Besides better weather conditions, the foothills also provided acorns from Black Oak trees. The acorns from Black Oak made better flour than those from oak trees found closer to the Valley and that flour was a staple for the North Fork Mono.

The North Fork Mono were not the only tribe to use the Valley floor for hunting and fishing, the Yokut and Miwok also traveled from the foothills to hunt and gather in the Valley. tribes would gather to hunt and fish, and the North Fork Mono were at the center of a migratory circuit shared by tribes and the center of ceremonial and social life. The travels from foothills to Valley allowed tribes to hunt and gather a variety of foodstuffs during different seasons.

This use of the land near what is now Madera extended from before the first Spanish settlers to modern times.

When the federal government established an Indian reservation in the 1850s, near what is now the City of Madera, the Monos evolved into farmers.

What's interesting is the Tribe's name, the North Fork Mono Indians or the North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians. According to the Tribe's studies, the name was a result of their ancestors staying around the town of North Fork because of the non-native encroachment of their historical lands.

In 1916, records show, the federal government purchased 80 acres outside the community of North Fork. The purchase was made to provide a camping area for family members to stay when they visited their children attending the Presbyterian mission boarding school near North Fork.

Tomorrow, read the Tribe's account of their adaptability in Part II.

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Monday, August 21, 2006

Northfork Monos Proved to be Adaptable
(Part 2)

By Cal Tatum
Tribune Writer/Photographer

For tribes to survive before the Spanish arrived, creating migratory routes to provide food was vital. These routes developed into trade routes, working with other tribes for food and supplies. Travel from the foothills to the Valley floor was necessary to hunt for large game, catch fish and to gather white basket reeds found along the riverbanks on the Valley floor.

These trade routes were lifelines for California natives. One trade route was the trans-Sierra route known as the "Mono Trail," which connected indigenous peoples on both sides of the Sierra to the Pacific Ocean.

When tribal ancestors were forced to find work in the farming and timber industries, the Tribe still continued to travel between the foothills and the Valley, continuing their hunting and gathering tradition and to augment their farming.

Even culturally, the Northfork Mono adapted by marrying members of other tribes. Although the languages between tribes were different, there were enough similarities to overcome language barriers. The study showed that anthropologists "found a remarkable overlap of words, symbols and ceremonies between the Northfork Mono and neighboring tribes, especially the Chukchansi tribe (Foothill Yokut)."

The Northfork Mono accepted and interacted with early settlers of the region, even marrying Anglo settlers. When the Presbyterian church founded a mission and school near the town of North Fork in 1910, the tribe enrolled their young people into the school.

Parents of the children enrolled in the school would travel to North Fork and camp on school grounds to visit their children in between their trips to the Valley and seasonal jobs. The adoption to the school was seen as a method for the Tribe to find a better way of life for their children, that would relieve them of the migratory lifestyle the Northfork Mono had known for so many generations, a life that was filled with hardships.

Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, the tribe worked to integrate the new customs and institutions into their traditional ways of life. Lands allocated to them were usually small and barren. Many tried to develop farms, but most failed.

Reservations were set up by the government beginning in 1851. The Fresno Reservations were set up along the Fresno River in and around modern-day Madera and operated until 1859.

Three treaties, signed in 1851, created reservations in and around what is now the City of Madera, were set up to quell the conflicts between natives and non-natives. These conflicts began when disgruntled native allies of James D. Savage, a trader along the Fresno River, attacked and burned his businesses. During one event, three of Savage's men were killed.

Girls at the North Fork Presbyterian Mission.

From the collection of the Sierra Mono Indian Museum
Photo by: Special to the Madera Tribune

One of the treaty commissioners, Redick McKee, who had arrived to find a solution to the problem, wrote in Feb. 1851:

"So many direct injuries have been inflicted on these Indians by whites, and so many promises (were) made (to) them of restitution and redress, all of which remain unfulfilled, that they have lost all confidence, and are now, we are told, fighting with desperation for their lives and country. The whites have driven most of the southern tribes up into the mountains, from whence, as opportunities serve, they sally out into the valleys to steal and drive off cattle and mules, as an only alternative for starvation."

Even though the treaties promised to "set apart ... to have to hold for the sole use and occupancy of said Indian tribes forever," the reservations were closed in about 1859.

Despite these difficulties, the Northfork Mono continues to adapt to new ways of life, interacting with settlers and other tribes.

In Part III we will learn more about the Northfork Mono's integration with other tribes and their involvement in evolving into a local economy.

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Tuesday, August 22, 2006

The Reservation Years (Part 3)

By Cal Tatum
Tribune Writer/Photographer

The study on the ethnohistory of the Northfork Mono Indians describes in detail the years 1851 to 1859, when the federal government operated several reservations in and near what is now known as the City of Madera.

In this part we will look at what the study shows of those years.

Three treaty commissioners named McKee, Barbour and Wozencraft pushed to set up reservations in hopes of creating a more peaceful relationship between the native and non-native populations. They also wanted to get natives out of the foothills so miners and grazers could go on with their business.

This photo of ancestral cowboys and herdsmen was taken about 1900. Many of the Tribe's ancestors worked on ranches, farms and in the timber industry.

From the collection of Leona Chepo

Photo by: Special to the Madera Tribune

The Fresno River Farm was one of several Indian farms dotting the countryside that had been set aside in the treaties at Camp Barbour, Camp Belt, and Camp Keyes and reservation land.

By the mid-1850s, the Northfork Mono were under the jurisdiction of the Fresno River Sub-agency headquarters just southeast of what is now the city of Madera.

Administering the reservations was a difficult task, partly because of the distance between various farms. It was also complicated by disease, intrusion and disruption of aboriginal life.

The reservations were supposed to cover a large part of the San Joaquin Valley, including Madera, but were continuously being encroached upon by settlers because the government failed to ratify the treaties that created them.

Reservation borders were constantly changing; there are a variety of reports that state as much as 2,000 acres were planted and as little as 960 acres. The lands eventually shrunk until the federal government abandoned the reservation in 1859.

The land base had been placed under the control of one man, sub-agent Adam Johston and later Indian agent Martin B. Lewis.

The federal government did not provide an adequate defense of the reservation borders and failed to ratify the treaties.

There was much violence during this time that agents for the federal government attributed to a severe lack of food. Settlers and livestock had forever changed the environment, eliminating much of the natural foods the natives depended on.

Disease continued to devastate the Indian population. Crops that were being grown on the reservation were supposed to help teach natives a more "civilized" method of survival, but many crops failed due to drought and poor growing conditions.

To help with the food problem, Lewis encouraged the natives to continue practicing their art of hunting, fishing and gathering to supplement what was grown on the farms. Once again, natives found themselves spending part of their time in the Valley and part in the foothills. Other natives worked in mines and for farmers and ranchers.

The reservation was closed primarily due to an investigation by special agents J. Ross Browne and George Bailey. According to the study, Browne and Bailey visited the reservation in 1857, while many of the native people were away hunting, fishing, or working jobs. When they didn't find many natives on the reservation, they called the reservation a failure and recommended its closure.

The reservation was permanently shut down in 1859. That left the Northfork Mono and other Valley natives, who had become dependent on the farm and federal supplements, without a way to survive.

The California Indian Affairs office was organized and James McDuffie was appointed as superintendent of California Indian Affairs. McDuffie pushed to have all San Joaquin natives relocated to the Tejon Reservation where natives were used as laborers. Ancestors of the Northfork Mono stayed in the Valley instead of moving 100 to 300 miles away. They dispersed around the area, relying on family as they looked for work.

This pushed tribal ancestors and all tribes of the area into a new era, an era characterized by dispossession, violence and neglect.

Tomorrow we continue with part four. We will study the years between 1860 and 1900.

MADERA Tribune

Wednesday, August 23, 2006

A Precarious Situation (Part 4) North Fork Mono

By Cal Tatum
Tribune Writer/Photographer

In part three we learned about the formation of reservations, or farms, that the federal government set aside for native peoples in the San Joaquin Valley. They were set up to cool hostilities between some natives and settlers. But the reservations didn't last. When the reservations were closed in 1859, the lives of indigenous Californians became uncertain and difficult.

Native people who had relocated to the reservations were forced to go back to their lands in the foothills. Many found their lands occupied by settlers and altered by ranching, agribusiness, mining and the timber industry.

A small number moved further away to permanent reservations established by the 1870s. Most of the others fell between the cracks created by the federal government

Once again, natives found themselves becoming migratory. Many spent the harvest season in the Valley picking grapes near the village of Minturn, north of what is now the city of Madera. As many as two generations of the Northfork Mono worked at Minturn well into the 20th century.

By the 1880s, many had reacquired their traditional subsistence cycles. Sometimes whole families would travel to the Valley together to work in the fields, planting and harvesting.

The ethnohistory of the Tribe states that in 1850, the Act for the Government and Protection of Indians had the exact opposite effect its title implies—it didn't protect Indians.

The act became known as the California Slave Act and allowed indenture of native people and so-called "vagrant" adults under certain conditions. It prevented natives from testifying against non-natives in court. This meant that non-natives could violate the act and the natives could not testify against them.

According to the study, even when the proclamation for emancipation of slaves was issued by President Lincoln in 1863 and forced the repeal of the California law in 1867, kidnapping and the "sale" of natives continued.

In the 1880s a number of native advocacy groups were organized. Most of the groups were organized by middle- to upper-class non-natives who found the living conditions and neglect by the government to be deplorable. They pressed the government to improve the situation of native people.

These advocates believed the best way to save the natives was to help them assimilate into the "Euro-American" way of life. They blamed non-native settlers' greed for land historically used by natives for causing much of the natives' difficulties.

The advocates pushed the government to provide "civilization" programs, including education and incentive to become farmers.

Their efforts led to the development of the Dawes Act, or Allotment Act of 1887. The goal was to instill in natives the values of individualism, private land ownership and agricultural production. They also pushed for the development of boarding schools.

The Northfork Mono eventually received allotments of land under the Dawes Act beginning in the 1890s. To survive though, they had to blend traditional methods with more modern lifestyles. They took work on ranches in the Valley, worked in the timber industry in the mountains and still hunted and fished.

The Dawes or General Allotment Act was designed to address the problems of "landless Indians." Many ancestors of the Tribe received allotments. Native peoples rarely lived permanently on their allotment because the land was generally of poor quality and unsuitable for farming. Most only stayed on their allotments as part of their annual subsistence cycle.

The study states that researchers reviewed the allotments issued in the vicinity of the City of Madera and found that members of the Northfork Mono were among those who received allotments closest to the city.

The Act divided reservation lands into individually owned tracts of land. These lands could be used by native peoples and after 25 years, they could receive title to the property and citizenship. Unlike tribal lands, these parcels would be taxable. The allotments were usually poor lands for farming and couldn't support the natives.

By 1856, M.B. Lewis, a Fresno River Reservation agent, wrote that Mono and other native women were, in his opinion, improving their situation by taking non-native husbands. He wrote that native women had become "independent" of the men.

Many of the tribe's ancestors can be traced back to these marriages.

The circumstances of the years between 1860 and 1900 caused the Northfork Mono to migrate throughout the San Joaquin Valley. It was a time of hardship and a time of learning. The native peoples of the area faced incredible transformations of their traditional lifestyles and the landscape of their environment changed radically as settlers farmed and mined ancestral lands. They faced precarious relationships with non-natives but also learned how to work for, and sometimes with, non-natives.

Despite the changing environment, Northfork Mono Indians remained in the vicinity of the city of Madera, the report maintains.

In part 5 of the North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians ethnohistory, we will provide a summary and conclusion to the series.

MADERA Tribune

Thursday, August 24, 2006

North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians: Conclusion (Part 5)

By Cal Tatum
Tribune Writer/Photographer

The ethnohistory of the North Fork Mono Indians, like all tribes of the area, is a story of trials, accomplishments, adjustments and integration. Throughout their history the tribe has learned to adapt to an ever-changing environment. Relationships with other tribes and settlers were crucial to survival.

We have learned much about the history of the Northfork Mono, as they became known, but there is still more to learn.

In the early part of the 20th century, records on the tribe were sketchy and a generally neglected topic. Indian advocacy groups pressured the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to re-examine their responsibilities toward California natives. The secretary for one of the advocacy groups, Charles E. Kelsey, was appointed to the bureau in 1904 to survey the conditions of California Indians, especially those who found themselves landless. His findings and recommendations were submitted to Congress in 1906 and ancestors of the Northfork Mono appeared on the census, constituting their first enumeration by the bureau as a distinctive group.

As a result of Kelsey's work, the bureau purchased communal homes, rancherias, and individual tracts for allotments and homesteads. Eventually, the North Fork Rancheria was purchased near the Presbyterian Mission that many Northfork Mono children attended.

Most of the rancherias purchased for Indians were situated on poor quality land, not suitable for farming. The Northfork Mono generally used the land as a campground during their seasonal circuit and when visiting their children.

Historically, many Indian boarding schools around California were known as terrible places, but the Presbyterian Mission in North Fork does not appear to be an oppressive place. It wasn't known as a place where native culture and language was suppressed. In fact, during the first decades of the 20th century, the mission was important to the survival of the Tribe. The mission provided food and shelter for their children, as well as stability and education in American ways, while parents worked the labor circuit.

The mission was also concerned with the health of the North Fork Mono. In 1923, Field Matron Blanche Landon reported that Indian children came back from the Valley, after working the vineyards at Minturn, with bad cases of impetigo. They asked the government to help provide health care. That care did not arrive until 1928.

The men and women of the North Fork Rancheria spent much of their time working the fields and ranches in and around the city of Madera. Some enlisted into the military, even though

Madera resident Helen Pisano, center, is visited at the Minturn Vineyard in 1945 by her brother Harry Bethel and her grandmother Katie Schulte. Pisano has lived in the city of Madera since the 1930s.

From the collection of tribal citizen and Madera resident Helen PisanoPhoto by: Special to the Madera Tribune

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Indians were not considered citizens of the United States until 1924. Rancheria land could not support tribal citizens and many continued to intermarry, and migrate for employment purposes.

Then, in 1958, congress enacted the Rancheria Act, terminating federal trusteeship and recognition of 41 tribes in California, including the status and lands of the North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians. In 1966, the North Fork Rancheria was terminated.

Even though federal recognition of the tribe had ended, the Tribe continued. Many relocated to the Valley's urban area to access social and health services and find work.

In 1979, California Legal Services filed a class action suit against the federal government claiming the government failed to make clear provisions of the Rancheria Act and fell short of its promises for public improvements. The government settled the lawsuit in 1983 by restoring federal recognition to each of the 17 tribes represented in the suit, including the North Fork Mono.

(Part 5 Continued over)

North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians: Conclusion (Part 5)

(Cont. from front page)

The courts restored old Rancheria boundaries in 1987, but the North Fork Mono lands had been placed in private ownership and no lands were restored to tribal ownership. This gave the Tribe the distinction, one inconsistent with federal Indian policy, as being a recognized tribe without reservation land.

Working together, the Tribe formed the North Fork Tribal Council in 1993 and opened an office a year later. They adopted their constitution in 1996 and opened enrollment to descendants of the North Fork Mono people. Today, they are among the largest tribes in California with more than 1,350 citizens. They are the largest restored tribe in California.

Since 1993, the Tribe has formed a housing authority to help provide housing for tribal citizens, they have purchased 61.5 acres in North Fork for the development of tribal housing. The Tribe established a solid waste management plan and a wetland protection plan.

In 2003, the Tribal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program was implemented to promote self-sufficiency through education and cultural awareness.

The ethnohistorical study developed by the Tribe shows that the North Fork Mono and many other tribes were closely connected to Madera County and the city of Madera. Prior to the settlement of Spaniards and Anglos, the aboriginal peoples used the Valley floor as a place to hunt large game, fish and share ceremonies with other tribes. The history of tribes in the area shows them working with each other, and even intermarrying. They developed trade routes and established their own economic style.

When settlers came to California, it created great difficulties for California's natives, but they continued to find ways to survive. Some married white settlers and others worked the farms and ranches, becoming the first farm laborers in California.

The Tribe maintained a presence in the Valley, in and around Madera. Many tribal ancestors settled in Madera and are still community members, the study shows.

When the Rancherias were eliminated, citizens of the tribe migrated again to the Valley floor in search of work and services.

"Interviewed citizens of the tribe consistently reported that Madera was a friendly, convenient place for area native people to gather, shop, and access services," the ethnohistory report says. "Ancestors of the tribe are buried in Madera cemeteries and many citizens of the tribe still live there."

Before the gold rush, before the Spaniards, before modern-day farming, the report says that the North Fork Mono, and other tribes, occupied and used the lands in the San Joaquin Valley, including the area now known as the city of Madera.

End of series.